

Green Berets and the CIA

L. Fletcher Prouty / August 22, 1969

General Abrams strikes back.

Colonel Robert B. Rheault, the former commander of the Special Forces in South Vietnam, seems destined to be the Army's equivalent of Commander Bucher of the ill-fated Navy ship *Pueblo*. Commander Bucher and his men were captured by the North Koreans, held prisoners and maltreated, then released only to be subjected to a court of inquiry and almost court-martialed. Colonel Rheault along with six of his Special Forces officers and a sergeant were summarily arrested by their own side, and threatened with court-martial charges of murder and conspiracy to commit murder, arising from the alleged killing of a Vietnamese said to have been playing the doubly deceitful role of secret agent for both the Americans and the North Vietnamese. But, whatever the exact details turn out to have been in the Green Berets affair. Colonel Rheault and Commander Bucher and their men evidently were all victims of espionage snafus involving a special relationship between their military services and the Central Intelligence Agency. CIA involvement in such snafus can be traced in a direct line, from the current Green Berets case and the earlier *Pueblo* affair, through this country's roles in Laos and in Thailand, to at least as far back as the Bay of Pigs in 1961. And the United States Air Force had its historic misadventure with the CIA in the 1960 incident of the U-2 spy plane flown by Gary Powers, which the Russians shot down over the Soviet Union, to President Eisenhower's chagrin.

The Army commander-in-chief in South Vietnam, General Creighton W. Abrams, appears to have decided to declare war on the Special Forces (Green Berets)-CIA relationship. That would certainly account for the astounding rounding up of Colonel Rheault and the others. General Abrams's predecessors in Saigon, including General Maxwell Taylor, General Harkins and "Iron Mike" O'Daniel,

leaned over backward to accommodate American Intelligence. The arrest of the Green Berets commander indicates however that General Abrams feels differently than they did. He may have felt that he had inherited an untenable situation in the never-never land of top security, and have decided not to live with it. He apparently did not consult Washington in advance of the Green Beret arrests, although Colonel Rheault is a close friend of the Army Chief of Staff, and former Saigon commander. General William Westmoreland.

It is in fact no secret that the Green Berets have long been the uniformed mercenaries of the CIA. In the fifties, they existed rather precariously only on US military planning staffs around the world. But then the CIA, which was precluded from having operational forces of its own, realized that it could best achieve its aims by "adopting" the Special Forces. By doing so, the agency managed to acquire operational capacity even beyond its most ambitious dreams. The CIA achieved military embodiment in the US Special Forces establishment at Fort Bragg (now called the "John F." Kennedy Center for Military Assistance"). The CIA's men, like the Army's Special Forces troops there, were trained along lines laid down by such experts as Edward G. Lansdale and Samuel Wilson. There were also trainees from other countries. The foreign trainees ostensibly represented the uniformed services of their countries, but actually they were handpicked by their nations' intelligence organizations, and then had to be approved by the CIA. Under the guise of a military aid program these men attended the Special Forces School at Fort Bragg. A distinguished visitor to Fort Bragg's first class with the new Special Forces curriculum was the then Deputy Secretary of Defense, James H. Douglas: a coup for the CIA. Subsequently, Special Forces graduates served in the Bay of Pigs operation, also in Laos. The Green Berets had a powerful friend at court in those days. General Maxwell Taylor, special assistant to President Kennedy. They also had the benefit of the field experience (in Greece) of Henry Cabot Lodge, former US ambassador to Athens. He and his team of CIA experts, who included John Richardson, Desmond Fitzgerald and Bill Colby, laid the groundwork for the buildup of the Green Berets in Southeast Asia, with Laos as the first field of operations. When the situation in Laos deteriorated to the point where the CIA's favorite, Kong Le, rebelled, the Special Forces switched on CIA instructions to South Vietnam, and also to Thailand. Abandoning Laos meant abandoning nearly 100,000 Meo tribesmen, but this it was felt at the time could

not be helped: "*c'est la guerre.*"

The years, 1961-1963 saw a rapid buildup of Special Forces troops in South Vietnam. The CIA was entrenched and much more dominant inside the Ngo Dinh Diem government than either the State Department or the Defense Department; and the US Army Special Forces actually fell under the operational direction of the CIA from 1961 right through 1965, when Diem (and President Kennedy) were assassinated. Senior Special Forces officers, such men as General Bill Rosson, General Bill DuPew, General Stillwell, and Air Force Generals Dick Rowland and Ed Lansdale, all were either serving the CIA or wholeheartedly supported its activities. Following President Diem's death, the CIA succeeded in retaining much of its influence in South Vietnam by befriending General Ky, who became for a time the head of government in Saigon.

The CIA-Special Forces role was somewhat diluted following the Tonkin Gulf incidents and the ensuing rapid buildup of regular US Army strength in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the CIA and the Green Berets remained, and remain, powerful in Saigon as well as in Washington. Although the American military commander in South Vietnam ought to be the dominant figure during a war there, it is in fact the American ambassador who has for years been the all-important arbiter or umpire between the regular military, and the CIA and its Special Forces. Henceforth things may be different. The sensational arrest of Colonel Rheault and some of his men seems bound to change things. General Abrams appears to have decided to slash abruptly through the tangled web of bureaucratic and Intelligence intrigue.

If so, it can only be because he felt that the Special Forces, owing their real allegiance not to the Army but to the Central Intelligence Agency, had become a kind of cancer that was eating away the core of the regular military forces under his command. How many Army units in South Vietnam have fallen under the secret command of the CIA rather than of their rightful military chiefs? How many CIA operations are being carried out ostensibly as Army operations^ but with the Army virtually powerless to influence them? That story may never be known. But the Green Berets affair strongly suggests that a great deal of raw smoke was choking Army throats and that General Abrams decided, single-handed or in consort with other Army officers, to try to stamp out the fire. The sequel—for there is sure to be one—will indicate whether they have succeeded or failed.

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